

GRAND RAPIDS AUDUBON CLUB



the **CALLER**

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Northern Flicker

Photo By: Misty Ladd, via Unsplash.com

MARCH MEETING DETAILS

Monday, March 27 | 7:30PM | John Donnelly Conference Center, Aquinas College

Curtis Dykstra | *For the Birds: Fostering Backyard Habitats to Attract Birds*

Learn to maximize your yard's maximum potential as bird habitat. Go beyond just the use of bird feeders and look at how you can create an intentional habitat structure in your own yard that will attract birds for their benefit and your viewing pleasure. The three main ingredients that work in concert with each other to achieve this goal will be discussed and you'll learn what unique birds your yard could attract. Additionally, speaker Curtis Dykstra will describe the motivation behind and implementation of Hemlock Crossing's bird feeder observation area and what opportunities Ottawa County Parks has for you to learn and enjoy birds even more!

A Note from the Club President | Tricia Boot Vice President, acting President

With the influx of new birders in the last few years, and many new faces in our own club, I've been thinking lately about the topic of spark birds. Simply put, a spark bird is the bird that ignited your interest in birding. For me, it was the anhinga. I'll never forget the first time, about 14 years ago, I saw one of those slim, weird, wonderful waterbirds. I was living in South Florida, and becoming more and more enchanted with the decidedly non-Midwestern flora and fauna. Once I saw an anhinga in its signature pose--perched on a branch, sunning its pterodactyl-like wings after a dip--I was hooked. It opened my eyes to the huge variety of birds to see, and I haven't stopped looking.

As with last month, I'd like to call attention and extend gratitude to a few more of our wonderful volunteers: Linda Damstra, who maintains our club records, and pitches in many other ways, such as placing our navigational signs by the road to help guests find our monthly meetings. Katie Bolt, who with support from Kathy Haase and Jeanne Griffin, leads our Thursday morning bird walks at Millennium Park. And finally, Fred VanOeveren, who maintains our website and ensures timely posting of interesting and informative content for our community. Thank you all!

Update on the Grand Rapids Audubon Club Library

Kathy Haase

Stop by the library table and cart at the next meeting and check out the birding books that the club has. GRAC has a wide selection of 400 books, CDs, DVDs and maps of birding trails in our library. Are you planning a trip out of state or out of the country? The library has guides for many states, regions, and countries of the world. These informative resources are free and available to borrow.

Note: Library books are due back at the next regular club meeting. If you have checked out a book and aren't able to get to a meeting in the near future to return it, please email Kathy so she is aware. With the pandemic, a number of books are outstanding. Don't see a book you think we should have? Please, let Kathy know and we will look into purchasing it.

Contact: Kathy.Haase@sbcglobal.net

New titles include _____

Sparrows and Finches of the Great Lakes Region and Eastern North America _____

by Chris Earley

Warblers of the Great Lakes Region and Eastern North America _____

by Chris Earley

The Warbler Guide _____

by Tom Stephenson and Scott White

The Bird Way _____

by Jennifer Ackerman

Gulls Simplified _____

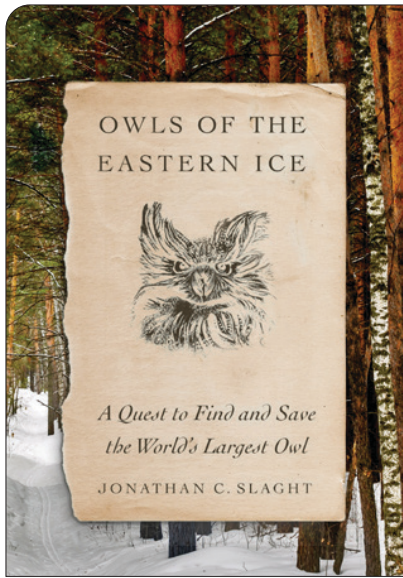
by Pete Dunne and Kevin Karlson

Books of Europe 2nd Ed. _____

by Lars Svensson - On order

Europe's Birds _____

by Rob Hume - On Order



Owls of the Eastern Ice: A Quest to Find and Save the World's Largest Owl

by Jonathan C. Slaght

A review, by Chris Baer

As a young birder, Jonathan Slaght saw his first Blakiston's fish owl in the forests of Russia's eastern provinces. These owls are very large at two feet tall with a wingspan of six feet. Jonathan's powerful encounter with the owl influenced him to dedicate his life to conservation as a scientist.

The owls are endangered because of habitat loss and fewer nesting sites. They require large mature trees that have been "topped" by windstorms.

Slaght's first search for the owls was fraught with problems, but like all research, little by little the owls' habits are revealed. The owls actually fish in shallow streams for young salmon. They wade into the water and catch the fish with their feet. The search for the owls involved looking for tracks in the snow near the stream and listening for the owls singing eerie duets during the breeding season.

With ingenious traps to catch the owls at streamside areas, Slaght and the fellow researchers were able to capture and fit the owls with monitoring harnesses to record their movements in their territories.

The remote forests in Eastern Russia are very wild, forested with pine, spruce, and deciduous trees; crisscrossed with logging roads that encourage poachers of deer, Amur tigers and bears. The tigers and bears were often hunting the researchers!

This owl study hopes to show what the owls need in territory size and habitat for conservators. This amazing story of scientific endeavor, adventure, and conservation involving Americans, Russians and others will keep you on the edge of your seat.

Jonathan C. Slaght is the Russia and Northeast Asia coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society, where he manages research projects on endangered species and coordinates avian conservation activities along the East Asia-Australasian Flyway from the Arctic to the tropics.



Blakiston's Fish Owl

Photo By: Takashi Muramatsu, via Flickr.com

Remembering Eldon Greij

Eldon Greij was a professor of biology at Hope College and taught a wide range of topics, including ornithology, ecology, and field studies. He spent many hours with his students in the marshes associated with Lake Macatawa researching the Common Gallinule.

Eldon established the magazine *Birder's World* (now named *Birdwatching*) in 1987, serving as editor until 1997, and continued writing his beloved popular column "Those Amazing Birds" in every issue.

He came to speak to GRAC a number of times about birding, bird behavior, and bird photography. He also led tours to South America, Africa and within Michigan. He was always an enthusiastic, considerate, courteous man, and had a wonderful sense of humor. His tips and advice on bird photography were special for many people.

Eldon died in 2021 at the age of 84.



Spring Bluebird Festival March 25, 2023

The Michigan Bluebird Society is pleased to announce its annual Spring Bluebird Festival on Saturday, March 25th at the Prince Conference Center in Grand Rapids. This all-day educational event will include programs on bluebirds and other bird topics, a Bluebird Expo featuring products for sale and nature/environmental exhibits, kid's activities, and nature hike at the Bunker Interpretive Center. The keynote program will be by Naturalist and filmmaker Charles St. Charles who has been working with MBS on a fascinating film about bluebirds highlighting their nesting cycle.

To obtain more information on the event, go to:
www.michiganbluebirds.org/springfestival.

The Eastern Bluebird used to be a very common bird across Michigan. However, habitat loss, the introduction of farming chemicals, and competition from non-native species caused their numbers to plummet dramatically in the early to mid-20th century. Fortunately, conservation efforts by people starting in the 1960's have helped bring the bluebird back to many parts of the State. The placement and monitoring of large numbers of nest boxes in open habitats was one of the key actions that has contributed to their recent comeback. The Michigan Bluebird Society's main purpose is to educate the public about how they can help these beautiful native birds, and to help initiate projects which increase bluebird nesting habitats in Michigan.



Birdathon 2023 - Get Ready!

Ed Bolt

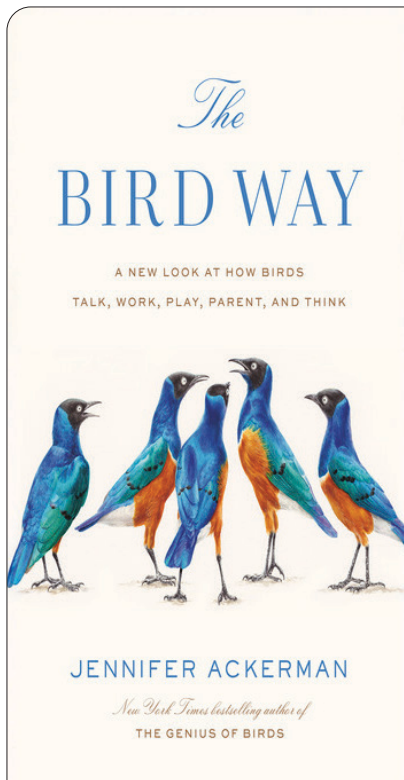
While we are all still 'sorting things out' from the house guest who stayed too long (Covid), it is time to give thought to returning to normal things, such as doing more birding.

GRAC's Birdathon will be happening again this year - mid-April until end of May (specific dates TBA in April 'Caller'. For those who have thought of entering in the past but have never done so, this is an excellent year to do it!

For Birdathon veterans, consider going after new goals, e.g. number of species, team members, team name, birding venue, money contributed, etc., to keep the event fresh and fun. Personally, I have a new spot in mind for a 'Big Sit'. We are all Americans, so it is natural to go for bigger and better. Let's do that too - more people, more donations.

As in other years, the event will be held mid-April to mid-May. Specific dates TBA in the April 'Caller' and on the website. Registration documents will also be available on the website.

Thanks to all who have participated in the past. Know that the month of March is the perfect time to start thinking about joining and improving upon Birdathon.



WMEAC Book Club

West Michigan Environmental Action Council, a local nonprofit, offers a plethora of resources for learning about conservation. Many events and programs are available to educate and spark action in our community to protect our environment. WEMAC hosts a virtual book club once a month to that is free and open to everyone.

For more information and sign up, please contact Marshall Gilgore at mkilgore@wmeac.org.

Wednesday, April 5 6:30-7:30pm
The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think by Jennifer Ackerman

Wednesday, May 3 6:30-7:30pm
The Big Fix: Seven Practical Steps to Save Our Planet by Hal Harvey and Justin Gillis

Rat Poisons Kill More Than Just Rats

Jan VanDyke

Recently I became aware of the hazards of rodenticides after hearing about the tragic death of a beloved family of Great Horned Owls at Philippe Park in Safety Harbor Florida. This included two adults and their three owlets after the parents unwittingly brought this poison food source back to their nest. Our Safety Harbor Owl FB Group is against the use of anticoagulant rodenticides, but not necessarily all rodenticides. There are some rodenticides such as bromethalin and cholecalciferol which, although very toxic via direct exposure, are not known to cause lethal secondary death in wildlife. Poisoned rats are easy prey for predators such as owls, hawks, and mammals; even cats and dogs are being poisoned after ingesting these rodents.

In 2009, a study was done on 164 owls in Canada that found 70% had residues of at least one rodenticide in their livers and nearly 50% had multiple rodenticides in their system. Predatory birds and animals being killed by rodenticides are the best and most natural rodent deterrent there are, e.g. one owl can consume over 1,200 rats a year!

When the Mayor of Safety Harbor heard about the incident at Philippe Park, he put out a PSA asking citizens there to stop using anticoagulant rodenticides, many in the community took his advice. Some local pest control companies have also chosen to use safer alternatives to these poisons. These companies have been put on "The Good List", so citizens there now have a choice when choosing who to hire.

In 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom signed into law "The California Ecosystems Protection Act" which prohibits most uses of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARS), and just recently, effective Jan. 21, 2023, British Columbia banned the widespread sale and use of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides. These examples prove that changing how we deal with unwanted pests is attainable.

The U.S. E.P.A., which has recently finished their once every 15-year evaluation regarding the use of deadly poisons in our environment, may yet determine that the status quo outweighs the benefits of those safer alternatives mentioned above. Waiting fifteen more years for the E.P.A. to again reevaluate this situation and maybe- eventually- determine that birds of prey and other critters deserve a meal without being poisoned just isn't acceptable. Concerned citizens can help now. When there is a need for rodent control, ask your pest control company to use a safer alternative, if they can't or won't, find a company that will. Spread the word about this issue, tell your family and friends to use safer alternatives, ask your local legislators to support the protection of wildlife by ending the use of rodenticides.

Together we can bring about this change.

Questions about how you can help? **Contact:** java.d@sbcglobal.net



Conservation Corner | Spencer High

Increasing Backyard Biodiversity

March is when I begin getting particularly antsy for spring to arrive. Every year when spring can't make up it's mind about arriving, I anxiously await my yard coming alive for the year. In just a few weeks my garden will break from it's winter dormancy, begin to shoot up a new year's growth and bring with it a whole host of interesting creatures that it supports.

In a natural community, we can directly see the correlation between plant biodiversity and the amount of wildlife that is supported by them. In a rain forest, where moisture and sunlight abound, there are large amounts of plant diversity which support many species of wildlife. This is in contrast to an ecosystem with harsher conditions (think desert and tundra) whose plants have had to adapt in order to survive. So, if we take this principle and apply it to our urban ecosystems, we may not have large unbroken tracts of land which support the wildlife species who require a lot of space, but we can still support smaller forms of life, especially plants, birds and insects.

Our cities may not be a natural community in the conventional sense, but that doesn't mean that our neighborhoods can't contain immense amounts of biodiversity! One of the best parts of conducting restoration work within our lawns and gardens is that we get to decide what to plant and we can be a little creative in what species we reintroduce since the conditions are not the same as they were before our neighborhoods existed.

When selecting which plants you'd like for your yard, a good place to start is the ecosystem survey map of Michigan circa 1800 which mapped out the entire state from an ecological viewpoint. The Michigan Natural Features Inventory has the map available on their website, and you can see what ecosystem was on your property before your neighborhood was built. Afterwards, you can go to the Natural Communities section of the MNFI website, and browse some of the plants found within that ecosystem. I will note that some of the ecosystems don't have the same name in our modern classification, but you may be able to deduce what the closest option is by looking at the trees around your neighborhood and comparing those listed within each Natural Community. Ecosystems are fluid, and not always cut and dry as strictly one type.

Once you are armed with a plant list, head over to one of our upcoming local native plant sales and see if there are any available species that match your list. There will probably be a lot of options, and this is all up to you, so if you see anything that strikes you as interesting or beautiful - I say try it out! You won't know if it'll thrive unless you give it a shot. If it's a success, great! If not, you'll have more information about what types of plants will thrive in your yard. There are annual native plant sales coming up at the Kent Conservation District, Calvin Ecosystem Preserve, and some of our local native plant nurseries - if you feel a bit overwhelmed, the staff should be able to help you out if you ask.

One of the best things about native plants is that they belong here and are already adapted to the conditions in your own backyard. Once they have established themselves, there is very little work that needs to be done to keep them alive. They have co-evolved with the ecosystem, and will naturally survive the cold winters, periods of drought, and any insects which naturally consume them. These plants also have relationships with all of the other species in your neighborhood and their natural competition will create a balance if you let it.

My policy for my garden at home is to pack as many species into the little room I have, and let the plants figure out their relationships with one another. These species have grown alongside each other for thousands of years, and by allowing survival of the fittest, I'm playing the odds that a balance will found that fills a gap within my local ecosystem. In order to make the most of the land we have - I think we should all consider returning as many native plants species to our yards as possible in order to preserve what biodiversity we still have left. Since my garden is only the size of 3 parking spaces in total, and home to 110 native plant species, I like to call it my micro-forest. Through three summers at my house (and just the one with my native plant garden) here is a list of the different wildlife species I have seen utilizing my yard as habitat - 68 birds, 35+ bees and wasps, 19 moth and butterflies, 17 beetles, 14 flies, 12 spiders, 10 mammals and 2 amphibians.

So, good luck planning for this upcoming year's growing season, I hope you explore some new species and enjoy the wildlife that visits them! If you have any questions, feel free to stop me and ask at the upcoming membership meeting.

To see the Michigan Natural Features Inventory map of Michigan circa 1800, visit: mnfi.anr.msu.edu/resources/vegetation-circa-1800. To read more about our natural communities, visit: mnfi.anr.msu.edu/communities/list

Northern Flicker

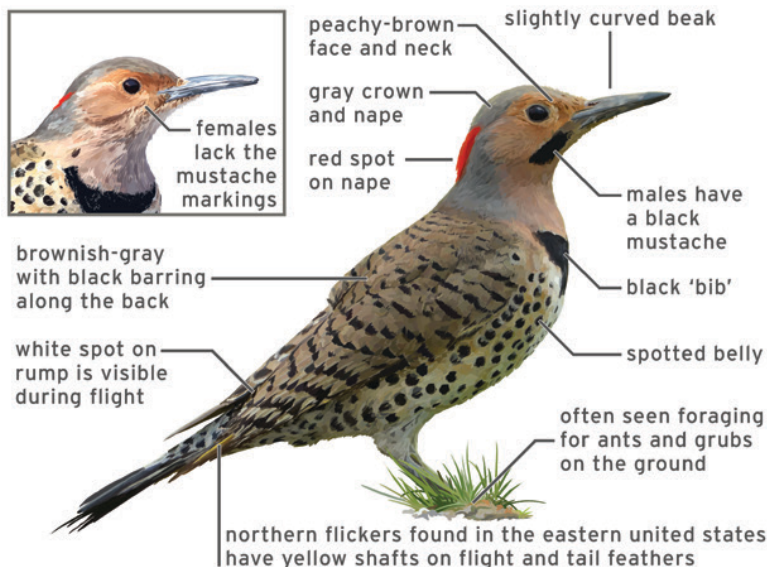
One day in the spring of 2021, while I was still working from home due to the pandemic, out of the corner of my eye I noticed repetitive movement on a big oak branch behind my house. I grabbed my desk binoculars (yes, desk binoculars) and took a look - there were three Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) doing what I've since termed "stabby dance-fighting." There were two males and one female, and the two males would perform their version of this ritual, gently stabbing their bills towards each other from a small distance, alternating sides, while making "wicka wicka wicka" sounds and flicking their bright yellow wings and tail. The males did this for HOURS at a time, at least twice a day, for about a week; the female would come and go during these sessions, letting them battle it out while she went about her day, then joining back in for a few minutes at a time, presumably to decide which dance partner was superior. Mating season was clearly in full swing.

During her breaks from the males, I would often see the female Flicker fly over my house and land in my front yard, which makes perfect sense, as this odd woodpecker's preferred foraging method is on the ground - Flickers are absolutely wild about ants. This means you can find them in yards and parks quite reliably, especially those bordered by wooded areas. However, when not foraging on the ground, Northern Flickers prefer the treetops, so it can be difficult to get a good look, plus they are generally skittish, so it is a good idea to familiarize yourself with their vocalizations to locate them.

Northern Flickers are a keystone species due to their nest excavation skills, as other cavity nesters reuse their nest holes in subsequent years. Unfortunately, their numbers have declined by 47% since 1966 per the North American Breeding Bird Survey, yet they are not recognized as threatened as they are still relatively common and very widespread across North America. One way you can help these birds is to encourage your HOA, township, city, etc. to allow dead trees and snags that are not a danger to remain in place to ensure these woodpeckers have nesting sites.

I highly suggest going out to your nearest park with a good mix of open lawn and wooded areas in the coming weeks. This is a spectacular bird with gorgeous plumage and entertaining courtship behavior, and I always light up when I see or hear one. You will not be disappointed!

Identifying Northern Flickers



Description:

Northern Flickers are large, woodpeckers with a gentle expression and handsome black-scalloped plumage over a brown base. Often, they can be seen foraging for ants and beetles on the ground, digging for them with their unusual, slightly curved bill.

Habitat:

Open woodlands with standing dead trees for nesting.

Best Time to See:

Active all year round

Best Place to See:

Backyard Feeders, Ball-Perkins Park, Millennium Park, Huff Park.

ID Tips & Tricks

- Unique, large woodpecker - if you get a good look in favorable lighting, you will have no doubt of the species.
- Pinkish throat, solid black bib, polka-dotted breast, bright yellow under tail and wings, black and brown barred back, slate blue nape and crown, with a red V or heart shape on the back of the head.
- Males have black malar stripe (mustache), and females are mustache-less.
- Foraging behavior is unique among our local woodpeckers - if you observe a woodpecker probing a lawn for ants, it's going to be a Flicker.
- In poor lighting, shape/silhouette and barring on the back is somewhat similar to the Red-Bellied Woodpecker, but Flickers are larger and have a bright white rump in flight which can be very helpful in this situation.

UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

Millennium Park Birding Hikes | Led By: Katie Bolt, Jeanne Griffin or Kathy Haase

Hike Millennium Park to see what's hanging around. Flat 2.0 or 3.0 mile loops are planned to see whatever might show up. Many birds have been reported from this varied habitat near the river. There are ponds, swampy ponds, lowland forest and various secondary growth. This can lead to a good variety of birds. Please dress for the expected weather conditions.

March 16, 23, 30 | 9:00AM | Meet at the end of the dead-end section of Veterans Memorial Drive

Bluebird Box Cleaning At The Muskegon Wastewater | Led By: Steve Minard and Ruth Fridsma

One way we can help our local nesting birds is by providing places for them to nest. Jim Ponshair has aided the birds for many years with a number of bluebird box trails at the Muskegon Wastewater. This helped the Wastewater win a 2015 environmental award. This does add up to a large number of boxes to clean every year, and we need a good-sized group to do the job. The annual bluebird box cleaning is a great way to learn your way around the Muskegon Wastewater. It's also a good way to learn about bluebird boxes, how to clean them and see how the type of box and habitat affects who uses the box. This year you can meet the group, or head directly to clean your group of boxes. Send Steve an email at sdminard@gmail.com to get a group of boxes to clean. Following lunch, some participants may bird the nearby Muskegon State Game Area to look for early migrants. This can be an all-day trip, or you can head out before or after lunch. For all the carpenters and builders out there, we always need more bluebird boxes. Boxes suffer damage over the years and new boxes are always needed. Send Steve an email at sdminard@gmail.com if you have new boxes to donate.

Saturday, March 25 | 9:00 AM | Meet at the Maple Island Road entrance to the Muskegon Wastewater System

For additional information about these trips, please visit graud.org/field_trips.html

FOLLOW THE GRAND RAPIDS AUDUBON CLUB ON SOCIAL MEDIA!

Follow our feed for the latest news in and around Grand Rapids about birdwatching, the conservation community, and events to attend. Tag [@grandrapidsaudubonclub](https://www.instagram.com/grandrapidsaudubonclub) in your outdoor discoveries and let us know what you see outside!



@GRANDRAPIDSAUDUBONCLUB

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Nominating - OPEN

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Scholarship - Katie Bolt

Special Events - OPEN

Website - Fred VanOeveren

MISSION

The Grand Rapids Audubon Club brings together people who enjoy nature, especially wild birds. We seek to protect and improve our natural environment and to advance nature education throughout West Michigan.

CONTACT

Website: graud.org

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INTERESTED IN SERVING ON THE BOARD OR HELPING ON A COMMITTEE?

Contact Tricia Boot:

president@graud.org